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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000811

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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA: COOLER HEADS PREVAIL

REFS: (A) BOGOTA 02179, (B) CARACAS 0778, (C) BOGOTA 2604

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR JOHN F. MAISTO. REASON: 1.5 (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) THE DIPLOMATIC FLAP BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA PROVOKED BY PRESIDENT CHAVEZ'S MARCH 10 PRESS CONFERENCE COMMENT IS OVER. VENEZUELAN FOREIGN MINISTER RANGEL AND HIS COLOMBIAN COUNTERPART HAVE WORKED HARD TO RESOLVE THE INCIDENT AND TO FOCUS AGAIN ON THE TASK AT HAND: MANAGING A COMPLEX BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP IN A WAY WHICH PROMOTES THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS AND TAKES INTO ACCOUNT VALID VENEZUELAN BORDER SECURITY CONCERNS. WHILE WORRISOME, THE INCIDENT DOES NOT PRESAGE AN INCREASE IN TENSION BETWEEN BOTH COUNTRIES. NEITHER SIDE IS LOOKING FOR A FIGHT. THE INCIDENT DOES, HOWEVER, SHOW THE FARC'S ABILITY TO MANIPULATE LINGERING DOUBTS AND HISTORIC ANIMOSITIES BETWEEN BOTH COUNTRIES TO THE FARC'S ADVANTAGE. IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, WE HAVE A SPECIAL ROLE TO PLAY TO HELP BUILD CONFIDENCE AND TO DEFINE ROLES AS VENEZUELA SEEKS TO ENGAGE POSITIVELY IN THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS. END SUMMARY.

YESTERDAY'S NEWS

¶2. (C) REFS A AND B INDICATE THAT THE DIPLOMATIC FLAP PROVOKED BY PRESIDENT CHAVEZ'S MARCH 10 PRESS CONFERENCE REMARKS IS OVER. VENEZUELAN FOREIGN MINISTER RANGEL, ON MARCH 11, DECLARED THE INCIDENT "TRANSITORY AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL" AND "WELL ON ITS WAY TO BEING RESOLVED." ACCORDING TO REF A, COLOMBIAN FOREIGN MINISTER FERNANDEZ DE SOTO, ON MARCH 12, SAID THE "DIFFERENCES HAVE BEEN FULLY RESOLVED." COLOMBIA'S AMBASSADOR TO VENEZUELA LUIS GUILLERMO GIRALDO, ON MARCH 15, TOLD AMBASSADOR, "THE INCIDENT IS OVER."

NEXT STEPS

¶3. (C) HARD WORK BY RANGEL AND FERNANDEZ DE SOTO HAS PUT THIS FLAP BEHIND BOTH COUNTRIES, AND FOCUSED ATTENTION WHERE IT SHOULD BE: MANAGING A COMPLEX BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP IN A WAY WHICH PROMOTES THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS WHILE TAKING INTO ACCOUNT VALID VENEZUELAN BORDER SECURITY CONCERNS. THE NEXT STEP IN THIS PROCESS, ACCORDING TO RANGEL, WILL BE A MEETING, AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, OF FOREIGN MINISTERS. THIS MEETING WILL SET THE STAGE FOR A MEETING BETWEEN CHAVEZ AND PASTRANA. FROM OUR CONVERSATIONS WITH RANGEL AND GIRALDO, BOTH SIDES RECOGNIZE THAT THIS PRESIDENTIAL MEETING MUST BE VERY CAREFULLY HANDLED. GIRALDO TOLD US THAT THE COMMUNIQUE AND PRESS CONFERENCES WHICH WOULD RESULT FROM SUCH A MEETING WOULD REQUIRE SPECIAL ATTENTION, AS THE MEDIA WILL BE PROBING FOR ANY SIGN OF DISAGREEMENT OR DISPUTE.

WHAT THE FLAP DOES NOT MEAN

14. (C) AS THE COLOMBIANS AND THE VENEZUELAN PUT THIS ASPECT OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP BACK ON TRACK, IT IS WORTHWHILE LOOKING AT WHAT THE FLAP DOES NOT MEAN AND, THEN, AT WHAT IT DOES MEAN. SPECIFICALLY, THE FLAP DOES NOT MEAN:

-- AN INCREASE IN OVERALL TENSION IN THE RELATIONSHIP. THE VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA RELATIONSHIP IS SOLIDLY FIXED IN A TIGHTLY WOVEN LATTICE OF COMMERCIAL, CULTURAL, ECOLOGICAL, AND MIGRATION PATTERNS AND RELATIONSHIPS. THIS FOUNDATION HAS WEATHERED FAR WORSE TEMPESTS THAN THE RECENT FLAP.

-- A HEIGHTENED POTENTIAL FOR BORDER INCIDENTS, ESPECIALLY IN REGARD TO MARITIME BOUNDARIES. NEITHER COUNTRY IS LOOKING FOR A FIGHT. BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE BUILT AN IMPRESSIVE POLITICAL BUFFER OF BINATIONAL COMMISSIONS AND STUDY GROUPS TO ADDRESS ALL THESE ISSUES, AND TO MANAGE THEM IN A LOW KEY AND REGULAR FASHION. FURTHERMORE, AT AN OPERATIONAL LEVEL, THE MILITARIES OF BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIPS ALONG THE FRONTIER, AS GENERAL WILHELM SAW DURING HIS VISIT LAST OCTOBER. MOREOVER, WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE CURRENT VENEZUELAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP HAS OPTIMAL RELATIONS WITH THEIR COLOMBIAN COUNTERPARTS. REGULAR REPORTING ON INFORMAL INTELLIGENCE-SHARING ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN BORDER UNITS, VENEZUELAN EXTRACTION AND INSERTION ASSISTANCE TO COLOMBIAN UNITS, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROCEDURES TO MANAGE CROSS-BORDER PURSUIT AND OTHER INCIDENTS FAR OUTWEIGH PRESS REPORTS OF ONE ARMY OR THE OTHER DEFILING THE TERRITORY OF THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRY.

WHAT IT DOES MEAN

15. (C) WHAT THE FLAP DOES MEAN:

-- CHAVEZ TALKS TOO MUCH. AS WE NOTED IN REF B, CHAVEZ NEEDS TO CULTIVATE SOME DISCRETION WHEN TALKING ABOUT THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS. FOREIGN MINISTER RANGEL, DEFENSE MINISTER, AND OTHERS AROUND CHAVEZ RECOGNIZE THIS. THEY HAVE TOLD HIM TO MEASURE HIS WORDS. THAT SAID, CHAVEZ IS TALKING TO THE VENEZUELAN PEOPLE ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA, AND ITS IMPACT ON VENEZUELA, IN AN OPEN AND TRANSPARENT WAY. NO PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT HAS DONE THIS. THE CALDERA GOVERNMENT MANAGED A TWO-TRACK POLICY OF PUBLICLY DEALING WITH THE GOC WHILE SECRETLY TREATING WITH THE GUERRILLAS. CHAVEZ HAS BROUGHT THIS RELATIONSHIP OUT INTO THE OPEN, AND, IN THE PROCESS, TRIED TO ESTABLISH SOME ACCOUNTABILITY ON THE PART OF THE GUERRILLAS FOR THEIR ACTIONS IN VENEZUELAN TERRITORY.

-- VENEZUELA IS ASSERTING ITS INTEREST IN THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS. WHETHER RIGHTLY OR WRONGLY, VENEZUELAN PERCEIVE THAT THE GOC IS NOT REALLY INTERESTED IN WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE VENEZUELAN SIDE OF THE FRONTIER. VENEZUELAN TELL ALL WHO WILL LISTEN THAT THEIRS IS THE ONLY COUNTRY IN THE REGION WHICH WOULD LIKE TO SEE LARGE CONCENTRATIONS OF NEIGHBORING TROOPS ON THE BORDER. WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THAT THE GOC IS HARD-PRESSED JUST TO MAINTAIN THE SECURITY OF MAJOR CITIES AND ECONOMIC CENTERS, THE GOV RESENTS THAT BORDER SECURITY HAS DEVOLVED ALMOST SOLELY TO THE VENEZUELAN ARMED FORCES. IN THIS REGARD, THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS IS NOT SIMPLY AN INTERNAL AFFAIR OF COLOMBIA.

-- THE COLOMBIAN PEACE PROCESS IS MORE COMPLICATED THAN THE GOV ANTICIPATED. WHILE THE GOV HAS HAD A RING-SIDE SEAT SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE INSURGENCY, AND HAS WATCHED WITH FASCINATED HORROR WHILE COLOMBIANS SLAUGHTERED EACH OTHER, IT ENTERED THE PEACE PROCESS AS AN INGENUE. CHAVEZ THOUGHT HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH PASTRANA WOULD BE ENOUGH TO SECURE THE TRUST OF THE GOC, AND THAT HIS BOLIVARIAN RHETORIC AND THE CONNECTION OF SOME OF HIS POLITICAL ALLIES TO THE GUERRILLAS WOULD BE ENOUGH TO WIN THEIR COLLABORATION. HE DID NOT ANTICIPATE THAT BOTH SIDES OF THE COLOMBIAN CONFLICT WOULD VIEW WITH SUSPICION AND DISTRUST HIS BARGING INTO THE PEACE PROCESS. HE ALSO DID NOT ANTICIPATE THAT ELEMENTS OF BOTH SIDES WOULD LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO EXCLUDE HIM FROM THE PROCESS. FOLLOWING THE EVENTS OF THE PAST TWO WEEKS--SPECIFICALLY, THE KILLING OF THE THREE U.S. CITIZENS AND THE PASTRANA MEETING POSTPONEMENT--CHAVEZ AND HIS GOVERNMENT LEARNED AN IMPORTANT LESSON. AS RANGEL TOLD US (REF B), THEY ARE NOW REFLECTING ON THEIR ROLE IN THAT PROCESS.

-- THE GUERRILLAS ARE CAPABLE OF MANIPULATING LINGERING SUSPICIONS AND HISTORIC ANIMOSITIES BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA. THE FARC AND THE ELN ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO BENEFIT FROM THE RECENT FLAP. BY TRYING TO PLAY ONE COUNTRY OFF AGAINST THE OTHER, THEY SEEK TO CREATE DIVISIONS AMONG THE PROTAGONISTS OF PEACE. AS RANGEL TOLD US, THE GOV VIEWS THE RECENT GUT-WRENCHING BRUTALITY OF THE EXECUTION OF THE THREE U.S. CITIZENS AS JUST SUCH A PROVOCATION, DESIGNED TO CAUSE PROBLEMS AND DOUBTS AMONG VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA, AND THE THIRD PLAYER IN THE PEACE PROCESS: THE U.S.

WHAT WE MUST DO

16. (C) THE VENEZUELANS HAVE REACHED OUT TO US AND REQUESTED OUR HELP IN EVALUATING RECENT EVENTS AND IN DEFINING THEIR ROLE IN THE PEACE PROCESS. WE SHOULD RESPOND QUICKLY AND POSITIVELY TO THIS REQUEST. AS AMEMBASSY BOGOTA NOTES IN REF A, COOLER HEADS HAVE PREVAILED IN THIS MOST RECENT INCIDENT. HOWEVER, GIVEN THAT THE ANTAGONISTS IN THIS DRAMA ARE THE FARC AND THE ELN, WE CAN EXPECT MORE PROVOCATIONS.

MAISTO